

THE EFFECTS OF THE EXAMINATION SYSTEM.*

BY MARK WILKES, JUN.

My motive in addressing you on a subject of such grave importance as education is not to instruct or delight you, but to excite your criticism, and hear my own opinions either endorsed or refuted. Conversation and discussion after reading and thought do much to free the mind from encumbrance, and, by sifting, retaining, and rejecting, prepare the way for fresh acquisition. I will not now discuss the desire expressed by your society for truer harmony between the two stages of education at home and at school, but rather examine the nature and origin of the present system of school education, believing that a reform can be permanent and progressive only in so far as it is a development of existing institutions.

The Education Act of 1870 is a good standpoint for our purpose, and if I call up its most marked characteristics you will recognise that it has had a most potent influence, not only on the elementary schools, but also on the higher grade schools, with which we are more immediately concerned. By drawing up a code of subjects to be taught, and by fixing a definite standard by which the results of teaching should be assessed, this great organisation for education set up a unity of aim which bound together all schools under its control.

Before this recognised standard of excellence was established and public inspection enforced, teachers felt no need of special preparation for their work, and the quality of the teaching depended solely on their individual feeling of what was due to the parents.

The Act of 1870 had for its most permanent and beneficial result the correction of abuses arising from this licence, though it also brought into notice the lack of sound methods of teaching

* Paper read before the South Hampstead branch of the P.N.E.U.

based on scientific principles, and the need of suitable text-books. The embodiment of a business-like spirit in school-keeping changed the school from a mere aggregate of classes to a complete whole, and permitted the true development of the pupil by graduated stages of training.

Originating in elementary schools, this definiteness of aim made itself felt in higher grade schools, and its influence will increase when middle-class schools are themselves subject to Government examination. Those who have aided in this pioneering work will know more than I can say of its reality and value; but this work should be considered only as preliminary to further advances if our schools are to offer an education which will satisfy even the most modest demands. We must ask if the sacrifices that have been made have received a full compensation in more regular school discipline. Of these sacrifices the minimised leisure of the pupil is not the least; home preparation absorbs so much time that there is no chance of anything so healthy as a hobby. The authority of school is too inquisitorial, and dominates a large part of the pupil's time which does not properly come under its jurisdiction, ignoring the fact that some children have a vein of quick fancy which delights in idleness, and real ability to think out at leisure such questions as can occur to them.

The school is not alone to blame in this matter, for parents are often responsible for the extensive curriculum of studies, and especially for the number of "accomplishments."

Again, though the unity of aim which the new standard has produced is a real gain, the standard itself—the examination test—has done little to raise the quality of the teaching.

It has been well said that the advantages of the examination system are so manifest that they have somewhat blinded us to the disadvantageous side of the question, for not only is the examination useful as a means of ascertaining the competency of an examinee, but it is also an opportunity in the hands of the pupil himself to assess his own knowledge, and put it in a presentable form.

Much real evil arises from making the examination the *end* of instruction, and it is doubtful how far an education, permeated by such a spirit and culminating in such a result, can continue the moral training of the home, or indeed be moral at all.

All will agree that the way to build up moral character is

first to awaken that instinct for discerning between right and wrong, which we call conscience, and then to teach unwavering obedience. When once this instinct is awakened, all duties merge into that of loyalty to it, and a truly moral man may be defined as one who acts on the side of right, not only at a time of deliberate consideration, but in moments of emergency.

The same principle governs the progress of the intellectual life, and it should be the first aim of the teacher to make the child a judge of his own mental condition, and to arouse a sense of distinction between ordered thought and a vague notion of facts, which may be called the intellectual conscience. Each subject studied will afford the required discipline in a slightly different form, and in time obedience to this instinct will become spontaneous, and inaccuracy distasteful in the extreme. The criterion thus set up in the mind of the pupil will make his progress comparatively slow, and the teacher's next function is to prevent these analytical investigations from becoming so ramified as to obscure the ideal whole which the child is not yet able to grasp. A system which not only enforces an external authority in place of this self-reliance as the basis of the acquirement of truth, but selects an aim as low as an examination test is wholly inadequate as moral training.

Under the system of constant preparation for examination nothing is left for the pupil to master except the retention in the memory of certain facts, often wholly without connection. The emptiness of the training is quickly perceived in after life, for the pupil has neither acquired the power of independent study, which is indispensable for success at the University, nor the practical information which would fit him for a commercial career.

I have thus attempted to show that our present school education fails both as moral and intellectual training, substituting either personal love for the teacher, or some material gain, in place of the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake.

A SHORT TREATISE ON READING ALOUD.

BY ERNEST LEGOUVÉ.

Translated for the "Parents' Review" by Mrs. Swire (with the kind permission of Messrs. Hetzel & Cie., of Paris).

CONCLUSION.

There is a general opinion which has become law that fables should always be read simply. Granted! But what do you mean by *simply*? Do you mean plainly, straightforwardly, in short, prosaically? Yes. Well, I say *No*. That is not reading La Fontaine, that is disfiguring him. It is not interpreting him, it is betraying him. La Fontaine is the most complex poet of the French language. No one presents so many contrasts! No poetry is so rich in antitheses! His well-earned nickname of "*Bonhomme*," his legitimate reputation for *naïveté*, his thousand diverting traits, have given us a wrong impression of his genius. His personal character conveys a false notion of his character as poet. Ingenuous in his life? Yes. Artless as an individual? Yes. But once he gets the pen between his fingers, he is the cleverest, the most skilful, I would even say the most cunning of artists. He has revealed his secret to us himself:—

Beneath my snow-white hairs,
I am fabricating all the time
Verses more silly than my prose.

"I fabricate." Do you understand the meaning of that word? Does it not energetically express the effort, the labour, the will which he employed? For with La Fontaine everything is calculated, premeditated, far-fetched, and yet at the same time by a marvellous gift everything is harmonious, smooth, and natural. Art is everywhere, artifice nowhere. What is his secret? Is it his delightful simplicity of heart, which, passing